

Co-creating Systems for True Belonging



Efforts to make schools more inclusive have laid a groundwork for improving student outcomes, yet many students with disabilities continue to be treated as if their presence in general education is optional, preventing them from realizing true belonging and their full potential. The National Center on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence at SWIFT Education Center assists with the implementation of policies, systems, and practices that move school climates toward rightful presence for dynamic learners.

The Center's [Rightful Presence Implementation Guide](#) outlines six key levers to promote rightful presence in schools. This brief highlights how partners used one of these levers—belonging—to identify barriers and rethink their practices to foster true belonging of previously marginalized learners.

Belonging

The Implementation Guide describes the Belonging lever as:

Schools establish environments conducive to student learning and growth by building climates of true belonging that recognize students' full humanity and inherent value, and enable them to freely bring their cultures and whole selves into the school.

Dynamic learners refers to students who were historically categorized as having significant cognitive disabilities.

Belonging



Six key levers to promote rightful presence.



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True belonging begins with a presumption of rightful presence that challenges guest/host power dynamics that normalize the existence of a group who is invited and a group with the power to invite.

The Center is working with partners to introduce the concept of rightful presence across the whole system—state, district, and school levels. Following professional learning sessions and coaching with state-level teams about the idea of rightful presence, one state wrote in the idea of rightful presence as a foundational assumption of its statewide multi-tiered system of support. They are hosting professional learning sessions throughout the state and report that these sessions are prompting meaningful discussions about rightful presence and that teachers and administrators are requesting more training around the concept.

Reflecting on traditional guest/host power dynamics is leading to change in another partner state. For example, district leaders identified existing practices for creating class rosters as a barrier to rightful presence after being introduced to the concept through work with the National Center. By default, many students with IEPs were assigned to a separate special education room as their primary classroom. Rather than assuming these students truly belonged in general education spaces, the process positioned them as “guests” whose presence created logistical issues. Class size limits were exceeded when

What is Rightful Presence?

At the systems level, rightful presence is grounded in three big ideas:

True Belonging

To truly belong is to take a deep sense of comfort, safety, and peace, and connect it to an experience, place, or relationship.

We often feel most peaceful in a state of non-judgment and emotional validation.

Inherent Value

Inherent value means a person’s value does not need to be proven to exist; it is assumed to exist, even if undefined or unconventional.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of educators, staff and systems to search until the value is found.

Shifted Power Dynamics

Rightful Presence is characterized by a fundamental shift away from guest/host power dynamics, not inclusion.

Marginalized students, families, and communities should be integral to the shaping and design of educational systems policies, and practices.

they participated in general education settings, which in turn caused issues with teachers' contracts, fire codes, and physical space. As a result of these reflective discussions, coaches with the National Center on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence are working with district leaders to consider alternative ways to form class rosters that foster true belonging.

Conclusion

Together with partners, the National Center on Inclusion Toward Rightful Presence is identifying pathways to promote the rightful presence of dynamic learners in the general education curriculum and contexts. We will continue to highlight successes and examples as this work advances in partner sites.



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My work with SWIFT has been a profound source of inspiration, empowering me to embrace and advocate for the concept of rightful presence in both my professional and personal life. This perspective has enabled me to identify and challenge harmful policies and practices that often exclude students who are marginalized and overlooked.

This mission has gained significant traction across Delaware, reaching special education leaders, math and reading professionals, and new teachers. It is incredibly rewarding to witness the transformation in perspectives as individuals encounter the concept of rightful presence for the first time.

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